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Pattern of conferences

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Report of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions

I. Introduction

1. The Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions has considered the report of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences (A/66/118 and Corr.1). The Committee also had before it a draft version of the report of the Committee on Conferences for 2011 (A/66/32), which includes the text of a draft resolution on the pattern of conferences. During its consideration of the report, the Advisory Committee met with representatives of the Secretary-General who provided additional information and clarification.

2. The report of the Secretary-General, which was submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 65/245 and other relevant mandates, contains information on conference management issues as well as initiatives undertaken by the Secretariat to improve the quality of conference services provided to Member States. The report also puts forward suggestions regarding measures that could be taken to improve the efficiency of the management of conferences and meetings at the United Nations. It is indicated that, consistent with the "paper-smart" initiative, additional statistical data supplementary to the report is available from the website of the Committee on Conferences.[1]

II. Meetings management

3. In paragraph 2 of his report, the Secretary-General provides information on the meetings planning system (g-Meets), which is part of the integrated conference management system (i-CMS). The planning system comprises two modules, which were launched in 2010 and 2011 at the four conference-servicing duty stations, New

[1] See http://dgacm.org/CoC/Report_of_the_SG_on_the_pattern_of_conferences_(A-66-118)_Supplementary_information.pdf.

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York, Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi, and is capable of generating a global electronic calendar of conferences and meetings. According to the Secretary-General, the system was used to prepare the draft biennial calendar of conferences and meetings for 2012-2013, which was approved by the Committee on Conferences at its September 2011 session.

4. With regard to a related matter, the Secretary-General invites the General Assembly to include in new legislative mandates all relevant information in respect of meetings and documentation in order to enable the Secretariat to fully assess conference-servicing needs that could have programme budget implications (A/66/118, para. 5). The Advisory Committee notes that the Committee on Conferences was of the opinion that Member States and the Secretariat should strive to make meeting planning a collaborative exercise whereby predictability is ensured and resources are utilized as efficiently as possible (A/66/32, para. 14). **The Committee recognizes the necessity of including in new legislative mandates all relevant information in respect of meetings and documentation in order to enable the Secretariat to fully assess the conference-servicing needs that could have programme budget implications. The Committee is of the opinion that the Secretary-General's proposal should be considered by the General Assembly, bearing in mind the provisions of rule 153 of the rules of procedure of the Assembly, in which the procedure for dealing with decisions that have programme budget implications is clearly set out.**

5. The Secretary-General, in section II of the supplementary information,[1] provides statistical data and analysis on the utilization of conference-servicing resources and facilities allocated to bodies that meet at the four headquarters duty stations. The data, which are compiled according to the methodology adopted by the Committee on Conferences, indicate that the overall utilization factor for conference-servicing resources and facilities for all duty stations in 2010 was 85 per cent, down from 86 per cent in 2009. New York in particular had a utilization factor of 81 per cent, compared with 84 per cent in 2009, resulting from the cancellation of 16 per cent of meetings and the ability to reassign only 61 per cent of the interpretation teams to other meetings. Similarly, the utilization factor for Nairobi decreased to 88 per cent in 2010 from 90 per cent in 2009 because of one cancellation and the inability to reassign the interpretation team (A/66/118, para. 8). **The Advisory Committee is disappointed at this recent negative trend and underlines the imperative of ensuring the full utilization of conference-servicing resources. The Committee expects to see improvement in the next report of the Secretary-General (see also paras. 7 and 8 below).**

6. The Secretary-General indicates that three intergovernmental bodies in New York, namely, the Special Committee on the Charter of the United Nations and on the Strengthening of the Role of the Organization, the Statistical Commission and the Committee on Contributions, had a utilization factor of less than the benchmark of 80 per cent for three consecutive years. In that regard, the Secretary-General proposes that the General Assembly reiterate its request to intergovernmental bodies to review their meeting entitlements and to plan and adjust their programmes of work on the basis of their actual utilization of conference-servicing resources in order to improve their efficiency in using conference services (ibid., paras. 11 and 12). **The Advisory Committee supports the Secretary-General's proposal.** In this connection, the Committee notes that it is the mandate of the Chair of the Committee on Conferences to hold consultations with the intergovernmental bodies

that utilize less than the benchmark of 80 per cent of their allocated resources. According to the report of the Committee on Conferences, however, the Special Committee on the Charter of the United Nations and on the Strengthening of the Role of the Organization and the Statistical Commission subsequently increased their utilization factor above 80 per cent in 2011; hence the consultation meetings would be necessary only for the Committee on Contributions, which has persistently underutilized the conference-servicing resources allocated to it.

7. In its report, the Committee on Conferences proposes additional remedial measures, such as reducing the impact of foreseeable cancellations by providing adequate advance notice and reducing meeting blocks to two hours when it is anticipated that less time is required and, whenever possible, adjusting the programme of work on the basis of past practice and actual utilization of conference services (A/66/32, para. 22). **The Advisory Committee welcomes the proposed measures aimed at increasing the overall utilization of conference resources.**

8. The Secretary-General indicates that the conference centre at the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) had a utilization rate of 70 per cent in 2010, down from 76 per cent in 2009. He cites competition from the hotels and government conference halls in Addis Ababa as well as the cancellation of meetings by regular users of the conference centre as the main reasons for the decreasing utilization rate (A/66/118, para. 17). Furthermore, it was explained to the Committee on Conferences that the inflexible pricing structure and the security procedures at the ECA complex had also contributed to the decreasing utilization rate. In a particular instance, it was reported that an international organization that had regularly used the conference centre for its meetings in 2009 had, with effect from 2010, transferred its meetings to another location, citing the inconvenience of United Nations security procedures and the better rates at the other location. The Secretary-General also outlines some initiatives being undertaken by the Commission to market the activities of the conference centre (ibid., para. 18). **The Advisory Committee is concerned at the decreasing utilization rate of the ECA conference centre and calls upon the Secretary-General to act quickly in order to formulate a more competitive pricing structure and an appropriate marketing strategy.**

III. Integrated global management

9. The Secretary-General discusses the evolution of integrated global management as a means for the efficient utilization and allocation of the Department's resources and describes the proximity rule, contained in the revised Compendium of Administrative Policies, Practices and Procedures of Conference Services, as one of its many facets. According to the report, the proximity rule requires that for all meetings held away from headquarters, a team that involves the least cost for servicing such meetings is assembled, and the documents are translated remotely in the headquarters location where the secretariat of the body organizing the meeting is located. Furthermore, in order to ensure the most cost-effective service provision, the costs of using staff from different duty stations, including regional commissions, and freelancers are compared and the least costly arrangement is used, with replacement costs, available capacity and quality assurance duly considered (ibid., paras. 22-25).

10. Upon enquiry, the Advisory Committee was informed that the application of the proximity rule resulted in a mixed team, thus allowing for the harmonization of policies, procedures and reporting tools, the proliferation of best practices and the development of a wide and versatile team of meetings management professionals throughout the Organization. The Committee was further informed that there have been instances in which the secretariat of a particular body has requested specific conference officers owing to their familiarity with technical or sensitive aspects of the subject matter of the meeting. This approach, according to the information provided, was being discouraged in the interest of developing a widely diversified and equally competent body of conference officers. Upon further enquiry, the Committee was informed that the proximity rule was applied consistently for all meetings, including those funded by extrabudgetary resources, held away from headquarters. Furthermore, the Committee was informed that the total estimated savings in 2010 from the application of the rule amounted to $657,000 in travel costs alone. While every effort was made to book travel 45 days in advance of the departure date in order to save on air ticket costs, the Committee was informed upon enquiry that it was not always possible because of delays in the remittance of funds in cases where the meeting is fully or partially funded by the host Government.

11. **The Advisory Committee supports the proximity rule as an efficient approach to servicing meetings away from headquarters duty stations, and it welcomes the efforts made by the Department to achieve efficiencies through the application of the rule. The Committee agrees that secretariats should not be able to nominate their conference officers and thus attempt to override considerations of overall effectiveness. Notwithstanding the assertion that the savings in travel costs amounted to $657,000 in 2010, the Committee is unable to make a meaningful determination of the efficiencies gained and the financial savings realized from the information provided. The Committee is particularly concerned that insufficient attention is being given to ensuring that travel arrangements are made with a view to achieving the savings envisioned under the proximity rule. As a result, the savings achieved so far are disappointing and inadequate. The Committee urges the Secretary-General to address this issue urgently. In addition, the Committee requests the Secretary-General to include in his next report on the pattern of conferences a more detailed analysis of the efficiencies gained as well as the lessons learned in this regard.**

12. The Secretary-General indicates that the Secretariat has undertaken a comprehensive review of conference management efficiency and accountability mechanisms across the four main duty stations pursuant to section III, paragraph 15, of General Assembly resolution 65/245, in which the Assembly reiterated an earlier request to the Secretary-General to develop mechanisms to enhance accountability for the effectiveness of the global management of conference services. In this connection, the Secretary-General confirms the principle of accountability and shared responsibility for conference services at Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi between the Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management and the Directors-General of the three Offices (ibid., para. 25).

13. In a related matter, the Secretary-General indicates that harmonized amendments to the Secretary-General's bulletins on the organization of the three Offices will be developed to delineate and codify the dual responsibility of the Under-Secretary-General and the respective Directors-General in relation to conference management. The Advisory Committee notes from the report of the

Committee on Conferences (A/66/32, para. 39) that while steady progress has been made, the issuance of Secretary-General's bulletins on organizational structures demands a careful review of various cross-organizational legal and administrative issues, which can be a lengthy process. **As indicated on previous occasions, the Committee underscores the importance it attaches to the authority and accountability of the Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management in the management of all the resources provided under section 2 of the budget. The Committee maintains that sustainable efficiency gains can be realized only if the reporting lines within the Department are aligned so as to afford the Under-Secretary-General the authority required to fulfil General Assembly mandates. In that regard, the Committee concurs with the Secretary-General's approach and requests him to finalize the amendments to the bulletins quickly in order to allow the implementation of the required reforms. Any delay in this matter manifests itself in the form of higher costs for the Organization. Furthermore, the Committee recommends that the Secretary-General be requested to report on the results in the context of the next report on the pattern of conferences.**

14. As indicated in the report of the Secretary-General, a global e-survey was carried out twice, in May and November 2010, to elicit feedback from Member and observer States in order to improve the quality of conference services. It is further indicated that, despite the Department's efforts, the response rates of 137 responses in May and 130 in November were disappointingly low, owing mainly to difficulties experienced in finding information on the calendar of meetings (A/66/118, paras. 28 and 29). **The Advisory Committee is of the opinion that regular client surveys are an important means of gauging whether the objective of delivering quality conference services is being achieved. The Committee is of the view that this objective is undermined by the low response rate, which may also indicate a lack of awareness of or confidence in the survey. The Committee therefore urges the Secretary-General to explore means of improving the survey response rate.**

IV. Documentation and publications

15. The Secretary-General indicates that further progress was made in the area of proactive document management, with the slotting system having been implemented at the four main duty stations (ibid., para. 32). The Secretary-General indicates that in New York, the overall rate of timely submission of slotted pre-session documents for the first five months of 2011 reached 87 per cent (73 per cent in 2009 and 78 per cent in 2010). It is further stated that New York maintained 100 per cent processing compliance, meaning that all documents submitted on time and within the word limit were processed within four weeks. In addition, 83 per cent of slotted pre-session documents were issued within the mandated time frame, compared with 76 per cent in 2009 and 82 per cent in 2010. The Secretary-General attributes the improved compliance with submission guidelines to the efforts to monitor and follow up with author departments on their submission schedules. He cautions, however, that significant variation remains in the submission rates among author departments, with only 25 of 48 departments (52 per cent) reaching the target compliance rate of 90 per cent in 2010. **The Advisory Committee welcomes the progress reported as a result of the implementation of the slotting system and**

encourages the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management to continue its engagement with author departments in order to determine why only half of them have been able to achieve the target compliance rate.

16. The Advisory Committee recalls that the General Assembly, in its resolution 46/190, urged the Secretary-General to ensure that pre-session documents for meetings were distributed not less than six weeks before meetings and that, in resolution 47/202, the Assembly urged substantive departments of the Secretariat to submit pre-session documents to conference services at least 10 weeks before the beginning of a session to allow sufficient processing time for all the official languages. The Committee notes, therefore, that the above resolutions allow four weeks for the processing of documents, referred to as the 10-4-6 time frame.

17. The Secretary-General invites the General Assembly to amend the document submission rules to a 10-6-4 time frame whereby departments would submit documents 10 weeks before the session, as mandated, and the documents would be distributed not less than 4 weeks before the meeting, allowing for a 6-week processing period. The Secretary-General explains that, because of time pressure, a manuscript is most often processed simultaneously on three paths, namely, editing, referencing and translation, also referred to as parallel processing, which is inefficient and time-consuming but often unavoidable. The Secretary-General argues that giving the Department six weeks for processing would facilitate the change to a sequential workflow in which manuscripts are edited, formatted and finalized in the original language before being sent for translation (ibid., paras. 44-48). Furthermore, as explained to the Committee on Conferences, the change would also permit the use of computer-assisted tools to enhance quality and consistency in addition to generating savings by decreasing reliance on temporary assistance.

18. The Advisory Committee notes that the Committee on Conferences did not reach consensus on the Secretary-General's proposal on the question of document-processing schedules (A/66/32, para. 42). **The Advisory Committee concurs that the potential benefits of a sequential workflow would support the case for increasing the processing time to six weeks. While the Committee is of the opinion that the increased application of more efficient electronic distribution mechanisms would help to compensate for the reduction in distribution time, it underscores the importance of taking into account the time required by representatives of Member States to review the documents.**

V. Translation and interpretation

19. According to the Secretary-General, the projected retirements for the period 2010-2016 will lead to a turnover of 43 per cent for interpreters and 40 per cent for translators, meaning that competitive examinations will have to produce 119 new recruits for interpretation and 217 for translation over that period. The Secretary-General acknowledges the challenges of attracting and retaining language staff and has instituted a review of the competitive examination process, in cooperation with the Office of Human Resources Management, with a view to simplifying it without compromising standards. He further indicates that the short-term remedy of using freelance interpreters has proven unsatisfactory because of their unavailability at short notice, global competition for their services and the fact that conditions of

their temporary employment at the United Nations are not always as attractive as those offered by other institutions (A/66/118, paras. 52-55).

20. With regard to the efficiency of the competitive examination process, the Advisory Committee was informed, upon enquiry, that for the 55 language examinations (for interpreters, translators, editors, verbatim reporters, copy preparers and proofreaders, language reference assistants and editorial assistants) held over the five-year period from 2005 to 2009, a total of 38,231 applications had been received. Of those, 21,830 candidates (57 per cent) had been convoked to the written examination and only 1,550 (7.1 per cent) of those taking the exam had been placed on the roster of candidates eligible for recruitment. The Committee was informed that the proposal being implemented in consultation with the Office of Human Resources Management would introduce more robust and automated initial screening with effect from 2012 in order to reduce the number of applicants convoked to the written examination. **Given the very low rate of success in competitive examinations, the Committee welcomes the review of the examination process, especially the initial screening procedure. The Committee cautions, however, that measures to simplify the examination should not compromise the high quality requirements of the United Nations in the areas of translation and interpretation.**

21. The representatives of the Secretary-General explained that the Secretariat aimed at establishing a balance of about 75 per cent in-house to 25 per cent freelance capacity, which allowed for flexibility in handling workloads during both peak and normal periods. With regard to the shortage of freelance interpreters, especially in New York and Nairobi, the Advisory Committee was informed, upon enquiry, that there was a dearth of expertise across all language-related occupational groups, mainly for the reasons indicated in paragraph 19 above. The Committee was informed, however, that discrete circumstances accounted for variations in the availability of personnel among language groups. For example, the sizeable population of retired Arabic- and Chinese-language revisers and translators in the New York area provided a more than adequate pool of expertise. The representatives of the Secretary-General defended the use of retirees in terms of the savings in travel costs owing to their local availability as well as their experience, which facilitated a transfer of skills to the other staff. The Committee was further informed that, in order to address the general shortage of language staff, the Department was pursuing a three-pronged approach that involved the formalization of off-site translation, the review of competitive examinations (see para. 20 above) and the university outreach programme (see also paras. 23 and 24 below). **The Committee stresses the importance of establishing the right balance between in-house and freelance capacity. It also emphasizes the importance of creating the conditions to allow for an available pool of freelancers.**

22. The Advisory Committee was informed that consultations regarding off-site translation were continuing between the Secretariat and the International Association of Conference Translators with a view to renegotiating and updating the 1991 agreement between the Association and the United Nations system to formally incorporate off-site translation in the agreement. It was explained that the update would allow United Nations system organizations to leverage technology so that translation services could be provided by freelancers working from home anywhere in the world at substantial savings in terms of travel costs. Similarly, the Committee was informed, upon enquiry, that the existing contract with the International

Association of Conference Interpreters was being renegotiated to align the remuneration levels of freelancers with those of other staff. In particular, the Committee was informed that the United Nations system organizations were proposing to peg the freelance pay rates to the salary scale for regular staff at the appropriate level plus the post adjustment for the appropriate location in order to help bridge what is commonly referred to as the "North American gap", whereby freelance interpreters working in New York are paid up to $70 less per day than those elsewhere. **The Committee expects the Secretary-General to report on the results in the next report on the pattern of conferences.**

23. The Secretary-General cites the outreach to universities programme as a means of attracting new talent from those institutions in order to address the shortage of qualified candidates. According to the Secretary-General, 19 universities covering the six official languages, and all the major regions except Latin America and the Caribbean, had signed memorandums of understanding with the United Nations. In addition, there is informal cooperation between the Department and two Latin American universities. Through the language internship programme, the Department has continued to attract and train young professionals, a number of whom have subsequently passed the language competitive examinations and been recruited into the language services as staff members. It is indicated that the 2011 vacancy announcement for language internships attracted more than 600 applicants, 65 of whom were hosted by the four main duty stations (ibid., paras. 57 and 58).

24. The Advisory Committee was informed upon enquiry that the primary goal of the outreach programme was to have a steady stream of young language professionals available to fill vacancies as they arose in order to reduce the reliance on freelancers. The Committee recalls, however, that during its consideration of the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2012-2013, it was informed that there were no dedicated budgetary resources for the internship programme and that it would soon reach its limit in terms of the number of interns who could participate. In addition, the pool of interns was limited by the cost of travelling to and living in New York, Geneva and Vienna, leading to certain language combinations being underrepresented (see A/66/7, para. I.76).

25. **While the Advisory Committee welcomes the Department's efforts to attract young professionals in order to address the shortage of language staff, it reiterates its concern that the lack of dedicated resources for the internship programme may limit the pool of available interns and encourages the Secretary-General to intensify his efforts to secure extrabudgetary funding.**

26. In his report, the Secretary-General describes the training activities undertaken during the reporting period. It is indicated that traineeships are being used to enhance the pool of qualified professionals in language combinations that have been identified as problematic or critical for succession planning. Following the successes registered by the traineeship programmes in New York and in Vienna, the Department was considering options for formalizing a traineeship programme as requested by the General Assembly in its resolution 65/245. The Secretary-General states, however, that the training, outreach and succession planning efforts have been hampered by a lack of budgetary resources and that in the absence of adequate human and financial resources, the programme relied on the voluntary efforts of language staff to undertake training and outreach activities, often at the expense of their regular work. Preliminary enquiries have been made to members of the League

of Arab States regarding funding for Arabic language training (A/66/118, paras. 60-65). The concerns of the Advisory Committee in this regard were expressed in its report on the 2012-2013 budget (A/66/7, para. I.76). **The Committee reiterates its recommendation that the Secretary-General be encouraged to broaden efforts to secure extrabudgetary funding for training activities related to all six official languages.**

Proposal for the alternative delivery of summary records

27. The Secretary-General highlights the need to re-engineer the document-processing workflow in the light of technological advances in the field. In this connection, the Secretary-General indicates that the Department is exploring the application of computer-assisted translation tools, terminology databases, translation memories and machine translation, the use of which is expected to yield benefits in terms of quantity and quality if the necessary investment is made in equipment and training. The Secretary-General invites the General Assembly to approve the proposed continuation of the production of summary records in the original language only (English or French), complemented by supplemental systems to be put in place to meet the demand of Member States (A/66/118, paras. 70 and 71). The Advisory Committee recalls that the question of alternative delivery of summary records and the available supplemental systems had been discussed extensively in its report on the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2012-2013 (A/66/7, paras. I.55-I.58). In its report, the Committee recommended that the General Assembly consider the Secretary-General's proposal in the light of the outcome of the relevant deliberations of the Committee on Conferences, taking into account the views of the bodies entitled to summary records. The Advisory Committee noted the deliberations of the Committee on Conferences on the Secretary-General's proposal (see A/66/32, para. 56). **The Advisory Committee reiterates its earlier recommendation that the proposal be considered by the General Assembly and stresses the importance of taking into consideration the opinions of the bodies entitled to summary records.**

Proposal to enforce word limits for reports of treaty bodies and reports of States parties

28. The Secretary-General invites the General Assembly to further reinforce the course of action proposed in the report of the chairs of the human rights treaty bodies (A/65/190, annex II, para. 22), namely, that Member States be requested to respect the word limit when submitting treaty body reports. According to the Secretary-General, such limits would have a positive impact on the work burden for all concerned (A/66/118, para. 72). The Advisory Committee notes that the requirement for word limits applies to the Secretariat and to intergovernmental bodies but not to States parties to treaty bodies. The Committee further notes that, according to the Secretary-General, there was a 42 per cent increase in submissions of treaty body documents from Member States in 2010, the largest of which was in excess of 87,000 words (approximately 274 pages). **As expressed previously in its comments on the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2012-2013, the Committee considers that the imposition of page/word limits is a matter to be decided by the General Assembly (A/66/7, para. I.63).**

Proposal to amend the current arrangements for the provision of conference services to funds and programmes

29. During its consideration of the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2012-2013, the Advisory Committee was informed that the translation of documents originating from the funds and programmes was currently funded by regular budget resources under section 2. The Secretary-General was proposing to eliminate those requirements from section 2 of the budget and enter into a new arrangement with the funds and programmes concerned whereby they would contract directly with the Department for translation services on a "pay-as-you-go" basis. The Committee was informed at that time that the proposal would lead to a reduction of approximately $8 million in budgetary requirements for the Department and that the Executive Heads of UNDP, UNICEF and UNFPA had been notified of the proposed change. The Committee expressed the view that regular budget activities should not subsidize extrabudgetary ones and recommended that the proposal be referred, as appropriate, to the Committee on Conferences for discussion (ibid., para. I.61). The Advisory Committee was subsequently informed that the proposal had not been considered by the Committee on Conferences because it was a budgetary matter. **As previously stated, the Advisory Committee concurs with the Secretary-General's proposal and reiterates that regular budget funds should not subsidize extrabudgetary activities. The Committee therefore recommends that, subject to the approval of the Secretary-General's proposal by the General Assembly, reduced requirements of $8 million be reflected under section 2 of the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2012-2013.**